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## FIELD NOTES IN READING

### I. A METHOD WITH WORDS

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The primary teacher initiates the language habit in the two-fold aspect of reading and written expression. In the primary school, both these functions, so vital for intelligence, receive that fundamental bent which we call "attitude toward."

The teacher who stands at the entrance of this new life with books needs to have a simple vigorous hold on language; a sincere feeling toward it; an intelligent insight into its significance for the child.

From both the psychological laboratory and the writings of Helen Keller we have received some interesting facts that should enlighten us in our method with words.

Helen Keller, as only a blind-deaf-mute could do perhaps, gives us a valuable answer as to the meaning of the word for the mind.<sup>1</sup> This is illustrated in the story of her first word. When Miss Sullivan, her teacher from the Perkins Institute for the Blind, came to Helen, she found a nervous, passionate child, living in a dark and silent world into which only "wordless sensations" of touch, taste, and smell could enter.

The attempt to teach her the alphabet for the blind was at first fruitless, so difficult was it to bring to her shut-in mind the idea of the relation between the word and the thing it symbolized. One day after a "tussle" in trying to make the child see the relation between the word "doll" and the object, Helen seized her new doll and dashed it on the floor. She had not loved the doll and was keenly delighted when she felt the fragments at her feet. "In the still, dark world in which I lived," she says, "there was

<sup>1</sup> See Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*, Doubleday, Page & Co., and *The World I Live In*, The Century Co.

no strong sentiment or tenderness." Her teacher brought Helen her hat and they walked down the path to the well-house.

Someone was drawing water [writes Miss Keller] and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over my hand she spelled into the other the word "water," first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that water meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy; set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object that I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears: for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.

The gift of language gave back to Helen Keller her own rightful worlds, intellectual, social, and ethical, from which she had been an outcast. As she says in *The World I Live In*, "with the dropping of a little word from another hand into mine, a slight flutter of the fingers, began the intelligence, the joy, the fulness of my life."

This wonder of language comes to the child so early and so innately that it is lost in forgetfulness. The nearest approach to it comes when he is initiated into a written or printed language that opens to him the world of books.

When we say that a word is a symbol we have said very much indeed. Helen Keller found it fairly entertaining play when Miss Sullivan began to talk into her hand. Nevertheless she tired of it. Babies in much the same way amuse themselves with vocal and speech play, but they could never learn a language as long as it was play and nothing more, since without meaning words cannot make interesting play. A symbol is something that in itself alone is utterly devoid of significance.

But when Helen Keller felt the meaning of the word, the

case was changed; at a flash, the symbol as the bearer of an idea came. In that discovery lay all the difference of being in possession of mind or being dispossessed of mind. For the mind seizes innately on this word-symbol as something which belongs essentially to itself. Well might it say, "Now I can think!" "Now I can grasp the world!" "Now my feelings become coherent, my voice is shaped, I can know and be known!"

The word is a bearer of an idea: it stands for something besides itself. The point of conquest in Helen Keller's case lay in relating the symbol to the thing for which it stood. *The word can be known in and through the idea and in no other way.* When Helen learned that that particular flutter of the fingers meant "water," it became a word to her: until then it was just "finger play."

The case is exactly paralleled when one helps a child in the first primary class to bring meaning to a strange word; meaning robs the shape of its strangeness and the unintelligible form becomes intelligible. We call that flashing instant when meaning and word come together, "recognition." Word-recognition is joining the word-form to the idea for which it stands. If we do it for the first time and do it well, we rightly call it learning the word: if we have power to do it automatically as a part of a thinking-expressing process we have mastered the word.

The way in which the word is originally apprehended determines the character of the subsequent recall. Miss Sullivan exhibited the wise-foolishness of motherhood when she put one of Helen's hands under the flowing water while she spelled the word into the other. In the schools where reading is being most thoughtfully studied the early words are motor. But the important point is that the child is encouraged to make them motor. The vivid imaging of the printed word is made a matter of first importance. But the interest which will give the word significance must come from the content side. Thus from the first there is an effort to make written language the bearer of imagery, a means for dramatization, and it is associated always with a vivid, virile meaning. The "moment" of getting the new

word is made living, intent, where awareness of the word in and through the idea fills the mind

The mind has little use for the word in isolation. On the form side there is no reason why we should not be as interested in isolated as in related words. But there again the symbol shows its impotency apart from use or function. The word represents the idea and the idea never remains isolated. Ideas are related to form thoughts. The mind thinks, and ideas when they assume a vital, virile form always do it as a part of a thinking process. So words must get them to the work of helping forward the mind's own activities. However a word may be introduced, it is never mastered except as it is used in connection with other words.

In this respect the work of the psychological laboratory has corroborated with singular clearness the observations of thoughtful educators and both are in substantial agreement with Miss Keller's report.

Professor Cattell found that on an average—

Consciousness can at one time grasp four numbers, three to four letters, two words, or a sentence composed of four words. The letters are slightly more difficult to grasp than the numbers, every combination of numbers making a number that "gives sense." Not as many words as letters can be grasped at one time, but three times as many letters when they make words as when they have no connection. Twice as many words can be grasped when they make a sentence as when they have no connection. *The sentence is taken up as a whole; if it is grasped, the words appear very distinct*; this is also the case when the observer constructs an imaginary sentence from the traces he has taken up.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Zeitler,<sup>3</sup> after careful experiment, reached the conclusion that the definite fixing of the letters in the word is secured only through a knowledge of its meaning. The mind sees in the word the form that the meaning calls for. If the word is not known, the "letters fall into confusion." The word-form remains uncertain until the meaning is grasped. Therefore the "letter complex" *is seized on by the eye but established by the sense.*

This agrees with the experiments of Dr. Pillsbury<sup>4</sup> who found

<sup>2</sup> *Brain*, Vol. VIII. The italics are not in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Wundt's *Philosophische Studien*.

<sup>4</sup> *American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. VIII.

that there was a definite "moment" between the presentation of the word to the eye and its recognition, which came "in a flash." The visual image of the word is not clearly perceived, i. e., understood until its meaning is grasped. "Until meaning is associated with it, the word looks strange."

We read from the inside, outward: the inside indicating the meaning. The idea gives the word meaning and *in giving it meaning it makes it a living symbol*. Rapid recognition of words takes place only in sentences. This suggests that the smallest unit in the reading process is the sentence. We *recognize* isolated words: we *read* sentences. This puts the "alphabet method" out of count and also robs the "word method" of authority. We recognize written and printed words through their content. This power of recognition works most rapidly and normally when words are in such relation as to give them significance for the reader. *The sentence is the reading unit*.

Reading is a process of relating, thinking, imaging—getting meaning. Words in organic relation make this process possible. The work done in the psychological laboratory confirms what has been called the "thought method" or method of concentration in reading. It is safe to say that in our most enlightened schools this is the method employed. The child begins with a sentence or with the word having a sentence value: this always signifies a "story" to him. He reads for thought and his interest in content is made the dynamic of reading.

No experimental tests so far discredit the work of training children to power in getting word-forms. Word training is an important adjunct to the reading process. Such training falls under three important devices: phonic analysis without the use of diacritical marks: an acquaintance with word families that give power of quickly analyzing the word: training in getting new words through the context.

These devices give the child readiness in making out new words for himself. With this training the best schools recognize the need of inducing from the beginning a habit of self-help. *The teacher never tells the child a word that he can find out for himself*. If he has had the word before, he is encouraged to look

it up. If the context does not help and he can get the word by phonic analysis or by seeing in it a familiar phonogram, he is encouraged to do that. *The habit of self-help is recognized as essential to word-mastery.* The best schools today have not a word-method so much as a method with words and this method is a method of word-mastery into which the child is trained.

By far the most important feature of this method with words should be the training of the child into the habit of getting new words through the context. This is the method that every good mind uses. We do not often come on printed words that are not already in our oral vocabulary. What we need when we are reading is a suggestion that will call the word to consciousness through its meaning, and the context will do that better than any other means whatever. The work of Cattell and Zeitler points to word perception through context as the right habitual impulse to establish in getting at the new printed word, simply because it is in harmony with the mental process in reading. Training in both phonics and phonograms carries with it the tendency to secure recognition through form alone; it should be supplemented always by a training which makes meaning enlighten form.

During the reading activity the value of any method with words must be determined by its power of becoming tributary to that particular thinking process that is reading. If the word can be recognized without analysis by means of context it should always be done.

After the work is well begun consciousness of the word does not normally enter into the reading process. The perception of the word is purely automatic. This reflex power is the surest sign of word-mastery. Every teacher of primary reading recognizes its appearance, by the way the child directs his attention. When the attention tends to center on content, word-recognition is getting into the fringe of consciousness where it belongs. A method with words should lead to: (1) reflex power over the word; (2) a self-trustful attitude toward words; (3) the power of making words alive with thought and imagery.

The good master likes the young apprentice to take up his

new tools with fearless hands. To want to use the tool, to believe he can use the tool, and above all to desire to do something through it—that is the attitude that makes for growing skill; and words are tools.

Giving the child a method with words saves him from the most serious “arrest” of the reading class, viz., the danger of becoming a reader of words. He must grasp ideas, get images, read “stories,” and he must from the beginning be *expected to do this*. Two things have helped to produce that monstrosity of the schoolroom—the word-pronouncer; the first is the lack of mastery of the word so that the child is forced to read spelling-wise. The second, and by far the more dangerous, is the over-emphasis of oral reading.

The test of reading work should be made through the power of the individual to grasp thought accurately and with a good degree of rapidity. He only has mastered the word who makes the word a means of mastering the idea.